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## HESIOD AS AN ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS TEACHER

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About fifty thousand years after the death of the Neanderthal man and about eight hundred years before the coming of Christ, my hero, Hesiod, was born. Near Mount Helicon in Boeotia "he dwelt in Ascra, a wretched hamlet bad in winter, oppressive in summer, never genial." He dwelt in poverty, and in his poverty dreamed of some utopia "where one day's toil might produce subsistence sufficient for a year." In an imperfect society he sought to teach men how to improve their lot, and in an imperfect universe he sought "to justify the ways of God to men." His name is associated with various poems, but with two in particular which later antiquity believed he wrote. In the first, the *Theogony*, the poet explains the genesis of the gods and portrays the mighty conflict by which Zeus established himself as supreme ruler of the universe; the second, the *Works and Days*, is a sort of glorified prototype of *Poor Richard's Almanac*. These poems are of unusual interest because they represent in a certain sense a culmination of human achievement after fifty thousand years of progress; they are also interesting because of the enormous influence which they exercised on the ethical and religious thought of the Greeks. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that they exerted as profound an influence in the Greek world as the Old Testament has exerted in the Christian world. In discussing these two poems my thought has two main drifts: first, that the ethical teaching of Hesiod is essentially on as high a level as that of the Hebrew prophets who were his contemporaries in the eighth century before Christ, and second that we find in Hesiod in embryonic form the fundamental ethical and religious concepts of Aristotle and Plato. The comparison will not be far-fetched, if we say that Hesiod constituted the Old Testament, and Plato and Aristotle the New Testament of the Greek race.

It is convenient for me to introduce my discussion by calling your attention to what seems at first thought a contradiction and inconsistency in Plato's attitude towards Hesiod. At the close of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates, meditating on the possibilities of a future life, says: "What would a man not give for the privilege of talking with Hesiod?" Again in Plato's *Symposium* Socrates expresses the opinion that Hesiod's spiritual children are far finer than any children of flesh and blood. This is high compliment. But over against it we must set the fact that in Plato's *Republic* Hesiod is placed on the *index expurgatorius* because he has told certain scandalous stories about the gods. There is, however, no necessary contradiction here. If Plato were alive today, it is easy to conceive that he might say: "What would a man not give for the privileges of talking with Moses?" and that too without giving unqualified assent to all the ethical teachings of the Pentateuch. It is easy to conceive what he might say about those who recommend to adolescents the reading of the whole of the Old Testament as a religious exercise. If Plato were living in our twentieth century with the theory of evolution to the forefront of his thinking, we can readily conceive that he would take keen delight in tracing the ethical and religious growth of the Hebrews through the pages of the Old Testament, and in showing how their conception of Jehovah (Yahweh) had grown nobler from century to century; he might further show how as their conception of the deity grew nobler, their ethical concepts had risen to higher levels. Since we live in the twentieth century with the theory of evolution to the forefront of our thinking, this must be our general attitude in discussing Hesiod as an ethical and religious teacher. In the brief space at our disposal we should like to ask five questions about Hesiod. First: Was he a pioneer, the blazer of a new trail; did he lift Greek and human thought to a new level? Second: Did he have the poet's vitalizing power in such a degree that he could impose his ethical and religious views upon the poets, philosophers, and sculptors of subsequent generations? Third: Is there implicit in his *Theogony* and *Works and Days* the fundamental ethical doctrines of Aristotle? Fourth: Did he hold Plato's concept of a philanthropic god limited in power? Fifth:

How does his conception of the deity compare with that of Micah and the first Isaiah, who were approximately his contemporaries in the Hebrew world?

First: Was he a pioneer, the blazer of a new trail; did he lift Greek and human thought to a new and higher level? No one can answer this question with certainty. It is safer for us however to answer it in the negative, and to say that Hesiod like Homer was a compiler. We hardly have a right to expect that in making his compilation he would be as rigorous as Tribonian compiling the *Pandects* for Justinian, or as consistent as Aristotle in formulating his *Ethics*. We do not complain of the compilers of the Old Testament because they have preserved for us several distinct strata of Hebrew thought; we are rather grateful because they have given us the opportunity to study the progress of the Hebrew race. We shall not dwell therefore on Hesiod's inconsistencies; we shall dwell instead on the essential nobility of the higher strata of his thought. Hesiod's fellow countryman, Pindar, coming three centuries later eliminated various inconsistencies and stripped off much of the mythological machinery that was dear to Hesiod's heart, but the Zeus that he presented was not a whit nobler than the creation of the peasant poet of Ascra. Perhaps we may venture to assert that the Boeotian conception of Zeus formulated by Hesiod and Pindar is a somewhat more exalted and dignified personality than the Zeus of the Homeric poems.

Second: Did Hesiod have the poet's vitalizing power in such a degree that he could impose his ethical and religious views upon the poets, philosophers and sculptors who were the high priests of subsequent generations? This question we can assuredly answer in the affirmative. In the supreme fifth century of Greek thought we find Phidias carving Hesiod's battle between the gods and giants on the metopes of the Parthenon, illustrating the victory of intelligence over brute force. The same Phidias carved on the pedestal of the Athena Parthenos the story of Hesiod's Pandora, illustrating the victory of wisdom over all the ills of Pandora's box. Again in the Roman world when Horace would teach Augustus the human virtues on which a stable government must rest, he draws his ethical code and imagery from Hesiod.

Still again in our own English world when Milton would portray the struggle between Satan and the hosts of heaven, he draws his inspiration from Hesiod's mighty battle between the gods and giants.

Our third question: Are there implicit in the *Works and Days* and the *Theogony* of Hesiod, the fundamental ethical doctrines of Aristotle? If we were obliged to summarize the *Ethics* of Aristotle in three terms, we should mention his doctrine of justice, his doctrine of the golden mean, and his doctrine of the appropriate. These are but three aspects of one and the same thing. Long before the birth of Aristotle, when the sculptor carved in the vestibule of the temple at Delphi the two words *μηδὲν ἄγαν* (nothing in excess), he laid the foundation of Aristotle's ethical philosophy. We may assume that centuries before the sculptor gave those words their place of high honor in Apollo's temple, they had been deeply ingrained in the mental fibre of the Greek race. It only remained for Aristotle to justify the ways of God to men by proving that this racial instinct made for growth and happiness. Hesiod was born but thirty miles from Delphi. It would be strange indeed if we found no trace of *μηδὲν ἄγαν* in his poems. He was born but ten miles from Thebes, whose inhabitants according to Dicaearchus were noted for their insolence. The local tradition seems to admit the validity of this charge when it invents the myth that the earliest Thebans were sprung from dragon's teeth. We find that Hesiod has much to say against this particular form of excess,—this besetting sin of overweening pride, of arrogance and insolence. All the way through the *Theogony* the cardinal sin is this vice which the Greeks called *ὑβρις*, and for him who is guilty of this enormity, there is reserved the most condign punishments of Tartarus.

In elaborating the doctrine of the golden mean as the avoidance of excess and deficiency, Aristotle enumerates some eleven virtues. Of these, Hesiod lays due emphasis on eight: courage, temperance, liberality, gentleness, truthfulness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation. The three which he omits are court virtues which we should hardly expect to find in the verses of a peasant poet. They are, wittiness, high-mindedness, and magni-

ficence. In giving his final word of advice to his brother, Hesiod emphasizes explicitly the doctrine of the golden mean.

In the first half of the *Works and Days*, the *leit motiv* is justice. The word justice recurs some twenty-two times and always with heavy emphasis. This recalls the fact that Aristotle declared that justice is not a part, but the whole of virtue. In the second half of the *Works and Days* the *leit motiv* is Aristotle's favorite doctrine of the appropriate. To be sure it is a sort of Poor Richard's version of the doctrine, moving in the narrow circle of a peasant's life. The appropriate time to sow, to reap, and to gather into barns; the appropriate time to fell timber, to build a house, to marry a wife; the appropriate time, manner, and means of doing the hundred other things which constitute the short and simple annals of the poor. But for all that it is the doctrine of the appropriate in embryo, ready for Aristotle to expand and amplify in a much wider circle of human interests.

Our fourth question: Did Hesiod hold Plato's conception of a philanthropic god limited in power? The problem of evil and imperfection in the universe greatly perplexed the Greek mind, and the Greek philosophers had many explanations to offer, but there are three that stand forth preeminent. Epicurus, following Democritus, believed that the blind forces of nature after many cycles of fortuitous combinations of atoms had at last produced what seemed to be ordered progress. In such a universe the presence of evil and imperfection is not hard to understand. Heraclitus held that a supreme deity ruled all things by universal law, commanding even strife and suffering to do his bidding and work his beneficent ends. To this supreme deity all things were good; but to man because of his finite intelligence, certain things seemed evil. Plato could not blind himself to the present misery, failure, and imperfection of the world, and so postulated a philanthropic deity, limited in power, struggling for ascendancy against certain hostile forces.

It is this last conception of Plato that we find in its embryonic form in the *Theogony* of Hesiod. With a sweep of cosmic imagination that sometimes borders on the grotesque, he clothes the figure of Zeus with a nobility and majesty worthy of the supreme

deity. If "an honest god is the noblest work of man," surely Hesiod deserves much credit for the conception of Zeus that he presents. The career of Hesiod's Zeus is an apotheosis of justice, and a glorified edition of the story of the self-made man. Born with a bad heredity, he struggled against the hostile forces of a pluralistic universe, established justice and order among gods and men, and was finally elected sovereign ruler of the universe by unanimous consent. No one could boast a worse family tree than Zeus; no mortal, not even Orestes contemplating the sins and punishments of the House of Atreus, could complain that he had suffered more in respect to lineage, than had Zeus, the father of the gods. His great-grandfather was Chaos; his grandfather was Uranus, who first devised deeds of indignity; his father was always referred to as the crafty, crooked-minded one. Such were the family traditions that Zeus inherited. He inherited also a numerous band of relatives who were the embodiment of the vices of his family, who battled against the kingdom of justice that he was striving to establish. In particular there were four cousins who stood as the personifications of the four mental qualities that were most at war with human development and progress. In dealing with these four powerful cousins, Zeus made the penalty fit the crime. High-towering Menoetius, the embodiment of arrogance, insolence and overweening pride, he hurls to the nethermost depths of Tartarus. Prometheus, who uses his high intelligence for purposes of deception, he makes the victim of an ever growing conscience symbolized by the onsets of a voracious vulture. To Epimetheus, the personification of stupidity that refuses to be instructed, he presents all the ills of Pandora's box. To Atlas, patient, enduring Atlas who is devoid of self-assertion, he assigns the task of holding up the heavens, on the outskirts of the world,—the zero of occupations. Here we have in concrete form the four cardinal sins of the Greek mind: insolence, high intelligence used for purposes of deceit, stupidity that refuses to be instructed, and patience that has ceased to be a virtue. These were and are the four primary forces that militate against human progress and the establishment of justice.

Hesiod enumerates some twenty-five other disintegrating forces in human life, against which Zeus was obliged to battle. Most of these forces he brings to defeat by making subtle marriage alliances. Here we come to a sharp line of cleavage between Greek and Hebrew thought. In the Hebrew world, although Jehovah was but a magnified projection of the Hebrew mind, and although the Hebrews themselves practiced polygamy, they never represented Jehovah as polygamous. In the Hebrew heaven "there was neither marriage nor giving in marriage." In the Greek world it was far different. Whenever a heroic form arose, like that of Heracles or Asclepios, whose divine prowess subtracted something from human ill, it seemed but natural to ascribe his parentage to some god. According to Hesiod, however, Zeus's more important marriage alliances were not with mortal women, but with lovely abstractions. No one would find fault with Solomon and his three hundred wives, if he had been content to marry Wisdom, Order, Universal Law, and Memory, and if his children had been such ministers of sweetness and light, such incomparable agents of progress as those which Zeus begat.

His first wife, Metis (wisdom), by a somewhat circuitous route bore to him the bright-eyed Tritonian maiden, Athena, whom the Athenians honored as the goddess of wisdom. His second consort, Themis (the spirit of established custom), bore him six fair and useful children, Good Order, Justice, Peace, and the three Fates who give to men good and evil. These last three had once been considered the children of darkness and murky Night; but in Zeus's new kingdom of law and order they were reborn of a fairer mother, that men might understand destiny the better, and accept it more cheerfully. In the east pediment of the Parthenon, Phidias reproduced in marble Hesiod's conception of the Fates. As we behold them today in the British Museum, we are quite content to have our allotment of good and ill rest upon the knees of three such fair and gracious personalities.

His third wife, Eurynome, whose name indicates that she was a lover of law and order, bore to Zeus the fair-haired Graces, Aglaia, the resplendent one, Euphrosyne, queen of mirth and merriment, and Thalia, giver of abundance and good cheer. All



these contributed to the joy and radiance of human life. Zeus had for his fourth wife Memory, the mother of the Muses, the Muses whose songs gave to common mortals the means of forgetting the ills of life and a rest from care in a world not yet perfect. But the chief function of the Muses was to give instruction to kings in ways of gentleness and wisdom,—wisdom that could give righteous judgment and unerring counsel, wisdom that could stay strife and reverse by persuasion the judgment of the mob.

Not only did Zeus take precaution that kings should be instructed in ways of gentleness and justice; he also had a care for the ideals of common men. Over them he placed thirty thousand guardian angels, the spirits of the men of the golden age, "who ever haunted the earth as ministers of justice, ever holding before the eyes of men the ideals of their own age of gold, when men lived a life void of care and trouble and the wretchedness of age, delighting themselves in festivals out of reach of ills;—and they died as if overcome by sleep; all blessings were theirs; of its own will the fruitful field will bear them fruit, much and ample; and they gladly used to reap the labor of their hands in quietness along with many good things, being rich in flocks and dear to the blessed gods."

Like the prophet Ezekiel, Hesiod held that outward prosperity is indicative of inward rectitude of character. Like the psalmist of Ezekiel's time, he had "never seen the righteous forsaken nor their seed begging bread." However much we may deplore their inaccurate observation of human life, we cannot but applaud their attempt to portray a righteous Jehovah and a blameless Zeus. Three hundred years after Hesiod's time Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon* conceives that a just Zeus might teach men wisdom through suffering. About the same time in the Hebrew world the anonymous author of the book of Job declares that suffering is not necessarily indicative of sin.

We are perhaps now ready to ask our fifth and last question: How does Hesiod's conception of the supreme deity compare with that of Micah and the first Isaiah, who were approximately his contemporaries? Anyone who will carefully compare the

teachings of the first Isaiah with those of Hesiod will be surprised at the almost complete identity of the ethical and religious outlook of the two writers. In the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, we find four things repeatedly emphasized. First, that a multitude of sacrifices cannot take the place of justice. Second, the doom that surely awaits those who oppress the poor and needy. Third, the doom that surely awaits the proud and arrogant. Fourth, the prophecy of the coming of a righteous king who through wisdom and kindness shall establish justice. The preeminent characteristic of Isaiah's Jehovah is justice, just as it was the preeminent characteristic of Hesiod's Zeus. A dozen times Hesiod condemns bribe-swallowing judges who pervert justice and oppress the poor. A dozen times Isaiah does the same. We are in the habit of regarding *ἕβρις* (pride and arrogance) as a sin belonging peculiarly to the Greek decalogue. But read Isaiah. Ten different times Isaiah tells us how the proud and arrogant shall be brought low. Whether it be some powerful Hebrew, or the king of Moab or Assyria, he shall be brought low by Jehovah, as surely as Hesiod's proud and arrogant Menoetius was hurled by Zeus to the lowest depths of Tartarus. Hesiod makes no prediction concerning the coming of a righteous king, but at great length he tells how Zeus through the instruction of the Muses, teaches kings wisdom that gives righteous judgment and unerring counsel, wisdom that stays strife and reverses the decision of the ignorant mob. All this is repeated again in Micah. Let me close my discussion by quoting the central verse of Micah's prophecy: "What doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?" These sentiments, if you but look for them, you will find half a hundred times in Hesiod.